# PUNCH AND THE PERSIMMONS

## An Elephant That Remembered

"He Had Half a Mile of Pies to Eat Back Over"

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IT was the night of the first rehearsal in the new hippodrome, and six thousand empty theater chairs, in tier on tier and gallery on gallery, faced a proscenium-arch as wide as a street and as high as a church nave. A chorus the size of a regiment had formed in rank on a stage as big as a public square.

The conductor of an orchestra as large as a military band rose in a white sweater and tapped for silence with his baton. "Now, boys," he said, "the first tune you play in the house: 'The Star-Spangled Banner' in B-flat. B-flat! Now then!" The orchestra rose in a body. The conductor, on his podium, poised his arms as if about to fly. And suddenly on the silence of that empty shell of a theater the notes of a hundred instruments struck in a tremendous unison and set the air pulsing with the throb of the melody.

The chorus and the stage-hands and the ballet and the carpenters, as well as the decorators on their scaffoldings, the electricians on their ladders, the plasterers in the lobby, and the little group of lookers-on in the orchestra chairs, cheered and waved their hats and whistled through their fingers. You would have thought it was the signing of another Declaration of Independence and the ringing of another Liberty Bell.

But when the last high note had shrilled out into silence and the last persistent cheer had stopped in a self-conscious laugh, "Slivers" sat down with his worried frown, unrelieved. "Besides," he went on, "I've got to make my entrance in some fool kind of automobile that blows up, and I don't know any more about running an automobile than an elephant knows about eggs. I've never had any discrimination in killing people, either. I'm just's likely's not to run over the star herself, first night." He rubbed his forehead. "It'll be worse than Punch and the persimmons."

"Slivers" had made his name as a circus clown, and the ways of the stage were strange to him. He sighed.

"And who was Punch?"

"Punch," he answered in a tone of reminiscence and mild regret, "was a tom-cat in the shape of a baby elephant. I wish at I had him now. He'd be better than this trick automobile full of fireworks, anyhow." He added: "I wish't I'd taken a job was offered me once—running a steam roller on a macadam road. It'd only run one way, so they always used it on up-hill jobs and let it back down of itself. That was the part of the bus'ness that wasn't cushion-tired. You had to hang on to the smoke-stack and let her rip till she brought up against something that was hard. But it'd 'a' been good training for this stunt."

There was no indication in his lean face that he was conscious of any humor in the suggestion. His eyes were fixed sadly on a chorus of milkmaids in street costumes, dancing and pirouetting around the stage with the mechanical air of a rehearsal.

"Did you own him—the elephant?"

"Punch?" He shook his head. "I worked with him, but Burke owned him—Wally Burke—and Burke was half elephant himself, and half Hindu and the rest Irish. Did you ever see one of those fat China humpty-dumps they keep in a joss-house, with a long black mustache and a waist like a watermelon? Wally Burke was the only original of all them."

"And what was it that happened with the persimmons?"

He thought it over. "We were down South with Morris's—with a one-ring show. And Burke and the elephant were all the animals we had, except two old-maid lionesses that were too feeble to do knitting. We used to use their den for the band-wagon, with seats on top. They were no good, those two sissies. When we lost Hinch—that'd used to blow the big bass tuba—we tried to get the two lions to roar in where Hinch used to come in the tune; but you couldn't squeeze a roar out of those two old women short of putting them through a clotheswringer. Besides, Burke wouldn't prod 'em up.

"He had some sort of a Hindu notion about treating the brutes with decorum, the same as if they knew when you didn't take off your lid to them and say 'Please.' And after Punch and him'd do their turn with me in the ring, he'd take that leather-skinned rubber nose off to the animal tent, and powwow and gabble to him and stroke him and feed him peppermints, like he was an archbishop.

"He was a freak, Burke was; but he certainly did know how to make a parlor call on an elephant. He'd taught Punch to sit down on his far end and shake hands with his trunk and listen to you, as innocent and solemn-eyed as a pickaninny with a bottle of molasses. Only if Burke wasn't there, he'd listen to you a minute and then feel around in the straw till he'd filled his fire-hose full of sand, and then blow it in your face so hard you could go away and strike matches on yourself. He

"I See Mr. Punch Slide a Little Wicked Look at Me"

was the son of a baboon and an india-rubber water-bottle, Punch was. He had the manners of the one and the figure of the other.

"Well, that was all right too. Burke and me did the turn with him, both together; and if he didn't like me he was open to take it out of sulking and back-grunting to Burke. I told Burke he wasn't bringing the brute up right, and he said he'd send him to a kindergarten when the circus closed. He thought he knew elephant; I knew I didn't. That was all I knew; but it saved me from being made a haggis of by that snooty pile-driver when he started after me flat-footed one day with his pig's tail in the air.

"That was down in Tennessee. The train'd stopped that morning in a little jerk-water town, to fill up the ingine, and we hadn't been fed since five o'clock the day before; so when Burke sights a pie-shop across the road, he sings out: 'You can settle with me when I gets back'—and he starts on a run for the delicatessen shanty to get us all a mouthful. We hung out the car windows with our mouths open, like a nest o' young robins, and watched till the train gave a bump and began to pull out. And then we yelled.

"Burke didn't wait to get his change, at that, but came out the shop door running like a thief, with a pile of pies on one arm and a loaf of bread and a load of tinned grub and things under the other. He ramped across lots faster than I ever saw a fat man cover ground before; but when he swung into the tracks the train was sliding along more than fast. He sprinted and picked up a len'th, but he could see 't he wasn't going to make it with the load of groceries, and he began to drop the tinned grub to lighten up. We were screeching like a bunch of Indians, and hanging out the back platform trying to reach him, and he was up to his chin in pies, and gasping and goggling like a drowning man, dribbling bread and biscuits and hunks of cheese all down the line. And the faster he dropped 'em, the faster the train leaked away from him." He paused to scratch his ear thoughtfully.

"He threw over all the pies, and then didn't catch it. The last we saw of him, he was sitting on the rails wiping oil

"I Made a Flying Loop From the Middle of That Ring"